

Technological: Daft Punk – a rare interview on video making

(This is an interview I did in 2005 with Daft Punk's Thomas Bangalter for Promo magazine. At the time they weren't taking to the press but I think Bangalter liked the idea of talking about video rather than music. He remains one of the most enthusiastic people I have ever interviewed).

They may have called their current album *Human After All*, but the suspicion remains that Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem Christo of Daft Punk have been subsumed by their robotic alter-egos. After all, how else could they manage to juggle a successful long-term career as dance music pioneers with solo careers and running their own labels?

But now there's another notch to their robotic belts. The band have decided to take over the reins of their promotional video career, directing the videos for the singles from the new album themselves, starting with an automaton *Top Of The Pops* scenario for *Robot Rock* and now the disturbing technological fantasy of *Technologic*.

The move to directing is even more remarkable, when you consider that these videos will be pretty much the only way that the band will be promoting their latest album. But then, as well as holding an idiosyncratic attitude towards publicity – they are rarely seen without their mirror-visored helmets these days – Daft Punk have always been highly attuned to the potential of creative visuals.

Indeed, the band played a central role in the development of the music video medium in the Nineties when they provided the inspiration for two groundbreaking videos: *Da Funk*, by Spike Jonze – probably the first video ever to double as a short film – and Michel Gondry's *Around The World* – an iconic video, which was affectionately homaged in the video for LCD Soundsystem's recent hit *Daft Punk Are Playing At My House*. Then, to accompany their next album *Discovery*, they commissioned the full-length Japanese-produced anime, *Interstella 888*.

With these in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that Thomas Bangalter is not worried in the least by the issue of publicity. "The way we approach the music videos is pretty much the only way we are speaking out – we are not doing any promotion," he confirms.

"We feel we are doing this thing sincerely and with a lot of integrity, in maybe a radical way. But that's really the way we wanted to approach

this concept and this album and the music.”

Bangalter is talking from Los Angeles, where the band have recently set up a new base for their production company Daft Arts – in collaboration with producer Paul Hahn, previously at LA special effects house Method – to talk to Promo specifically about the duo’s ambitions in the sphere of the visual – which they clearly see as another outlet for their creativity, rather than a way of tying up their image.

“Right now, as creatives, we like to create things and we are more and more looking to express ourselves visually,” he explains. “We are not taking it as a plan, rather than a will and a need as artists to express ourselves by different means.”

Although 2005 has seen the band really knuckling down in the business of video production, their first foray into video-making was actually several years ago, providing the coda for the exemplary visual feast that accompanied the first Daft Punk album Homework. Bangalter and de Homem Christo directed the video for Fresh, a sequel of sorts to Jonze’s Da Funk video, featuring Charles, the lugubrious man-dog and also starring Jonze.

Highly impressive it is too, taking place on Malibu beach on a movie shoot and filmed in a single tracking shot. (It was released on their excellent DVD, DAFT: A Story About Dogs, Androids, Firemen And Tomatoes, in 1999, together with Da Funk, Around the World, Seb Janiak’s video for Burnin’ and Roman Coppola’s Revolution 909).

Bangalter reveals that despite having worked with several of the world’s most respected video directors before that, the band were never intimidated by crossing over into film-making with Fresh – quite the opposite, in fact. “A lot of them encouraged us to direct,” he recalls.

“Because of the vision that we had and the fact of knowing what we like and what we want, on some level they were all very enthusiastic about us expressing ourselves and were saying ‘Why don’t you direct yourselves?’ At one point, if you are interested in art and in film-making, the best way to get closer to it is to jump in and put your fears aside and try to do it.”

Furthermore, for a medium thought to be ephemeral even by many who consider it to be an artform, Bangalter does evidently believe in music video as a lasting statement, from which people can take their own personal interpretation over time.

“This is pretty much something that happened also with our previous album [2001’s Discovery],” he says. “When we released our Interstella DVD [2003’s full-length animated film by Leiji Matsumoto, based around the album], for a lot of people it was like a second reading of the music.”

A look back through Daft Punk’s videos proves Bangalter’s point: their remarkable quality remains completely undimmed by the vagaries of fashion or technological advancement. And as for the videos, for the

current album that the duo have directed themselves, they are effectively a brilliant distillation of their own sound.

As with their music, the videos respectfully incorporate elements of the past – the Seventies feel of the Robot Rock set or the Eighties-style digital graphics that introduce Technologic – in a way that is savvy and forward-looking, rather than dated or nostalgic. “We are not trying to be too retro futuristic about creating something that could have been done in 1983. It’s more like combining influences and things that we like about textures,” Bangalter explains.

It appears that the idea of texture is an important one for the band, both musically and visually. Bangalter says that he and de Homem Christo are “obsessed about texture”, whether it comes from frequencies or filters, as in music, or through a judicious use of film-making equipment to create a visual warmth. He compares the choice of the right camera or lenses to picking the correct microphone or perfect synthesiser sound and he says that the band spend a lot of time testing and combining equipment, both old and new, as a way of paying respect to the legacy of vintage equipment in film making. This may be a fairly time-intensive approach, but Bangalter believes that the audience will respond to the careful use of texture.

“In a way, everybody is very sensitive to texture,” he says. “There’s a lot of people who are like, ‘Oh yeah I saw that last Star Wars movie but you can tell it’s CG.’ People can see when something is different in terms of texture.”

And there is little question that Daft Punk are serious about expressing themselves through image in the future. While Daft Arts may still be in its infancy, the company has already produced a video for Smog’s I Feel Like The Mother Of The World, starring Chloe Sevigny, and they are currently working on a video for Human After All, the next single to be taken from the album.

There is also a video in the offing for album track Prime Time Of Your Life, to appear on a DVD EP later in the year. This latter piece is not being directed by the band, but by long-term collaborator Tony Gardner – the man responsible for the band’s own robot look of the last five years and as the gruesome robot baby of the Technologic video. Do not expect anything as cute as the robot helmets though – Bangalter confidently predicts that Prime Time will be both “unusable for marketing purposes” and “almost impossible to play on TV”.

You can almost hear the smile as he says this over the cracking transatlantic phone line. Bangalter sounds happy with this state of affairs and his excitement as the new film-making venture is palpable.

“It’s very rewarding to work with people and not just being the two of us in a studio making music,” he says. “This approach of being a team and working with skilled people, being able to extract something together, that’s a very human approach. Music is an important part of the spectrum, but image is a very important source of inspiration, of creation that we really want to play with.”

Daft Punk – Technologic (Virgin)
Directors: Daft Punk

By itself, the song Technologic comes across as a disco ode to the joys of technology, with a strangely helium-addled voice playfully urging the listener to “buy it, change it and format it”. But, with the video in tow, it’s an entirely different matter: as it unfurls, the song takes on a oddly unsettling edge and it becomes clear that this new technology may not be the simple joy that it seems.

“It addresses how people can perceive technologic and technology in general – it is something with a very seductive appeal, but at the same time there is a mixed feeling – something between heaven and hell,” explains the band’s Thomas Bangalter.

The promo starts with a small robotic monster – something like a junior de-skinned Terminator crossed with Chucky, complete with gigantic eyes and beetling eyebrows – watching TV in a darkened room, flanked by the band in full robot gear.

At first, a TV flashes up the song’s consumeresque lyrics, but this soon changes to show a startling landscape filled with orange pyramids. In one of these, flanked by the Daft Punk duo playing along on guitars, stands the robot monster’s double, mouthing the lyrics.

While the first monster, though certainly ugly, has a look of wild-eyed innocence, this double looks unquestionably evil. The “good” monster is spellbound, watching the TV with a naïve fascination. Soon, whether through fear, a desire for unity or some other unknown emotion, he slowly holds hands with the Daft Punk robots, in a strangely touching moment. As the song climaxes, he approaches the screen and holds it in a desperate embrace.

The robot monster character was created by special effects ace Tony Gardner, the man responsible for the look of the band’s robot mask over the last five years and director of Daft Punk’s forthcoming video for Prime Time Of Your Life. The boggle-eyed beast is a remarkable figure, with the ability to convey both a sense of creeping evil and harmless innocence.

“It’s the alter ego,” Bangalter suggests. “At the same time the little character is watching TV with the viewer, kind of scared and addicted to it, he has this alter ego in control on the other side of the TV – which we do too, when we are watching TV.”

The robot’s facial movements – all rolling heads, shifting eyebrows and staring eyes – are so captivating, that possibly the strongest shots in the whole video come when the screen is filled with just his giant mechanical face. The movement – a mixture of puppetry and computer effects – is filmed in simple, almost crude shots, which frame the face, enhancing the visual power of the set-up.

“These shots are our favourites,” says Bangalter, “because you just show something that is very weird or amazing, but it is shown in a very simple way so that the images can really go straight at you.”